

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 OMB-01
ACDA-07 IO-13 TRSE-00 MCT-01 AID-05 /095 W
----- 026197 /14

R 160740Z DEC 76
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 949
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
DIA WASHDC

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 8572

E.O. 11652: XGDS-4
TAGS: PINS, SY
SUBJECT: SYRIAN DISSIDENT PROVIDES FURTHER DETAILS OF RECENT
COUP ATTEMPT AGAINST ASAD REGIME

REF: DAMASCUS 8542

1. SUMMARY: DISSIDENT HAMOUD SHOEFI TOLD EMBOFF DEC. 14
THAT GROUP OF OFFICERS UNCOVERED CONSPIRING AGAINST ASAD
REGIME ALMOST TOTALLY ALWATIE IN COMPOSITION. THEY WERE
EITHER PRO-JADID ALAWITES OR NEW GROUP OF INDEPENDENTS.
EXISTENCE OF THEIR ORGANIZATION HAS SHAKEN PRES. ASAD.
ACCORDING TO ONE THEORY, THEY INTENDED TO CLEAN UP PERVASIVE
CORRUPTION IN MILITARY. LEADER WAS RAIQ NAQQRI. ASAD
WORRIED THAT OTHER GROUPS OF LEFTIST YOUNG OFFICERS MAY
TRY TO MOVE AGAINST HIM IN FUTURE. ASAD HAS MET WITH
POLITBURO OF COMMUNIST PARTY OF SYRPAI (CPS) TO REQUEST CPS
HELP IN IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH SOVIET UNION IN
WHAT SHOEFI INTERPRETS AS EFFORT TO RELIEVE INTERNAL
PRESSURE ON HIM FROM THE LEFT.
END SUMMARY.

2. SYRIAN DISSIDENT HAMOUD SHOEFI TOLD EMBOFF DEC. 14
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THAT HE HAD HEARD TWO VERSIONS OF COUP ATTEMPT REPORTED
REFTEL. ACCORDING TO ONE VERSION, FROM SUB-SOURCE IN
SECURITY SERVICES, GROUP PLANNED TO ASSASSINATE PRES.
ASAD ON FIRST DAY OF 'JD AL-ADHA HOLIDAY WHEN PRES.

TRAVELED TO MOSQUE FOR PRAYERS. HIS DEATH WOULD BE SIGNAL FOR GROUP'S SUPPORTERS IN VARIOUS MILITARY UNITS TO RISE UP AGAINST REGIME. IN SECOND VERSION, PASSED TO SHOEFI BY ALAWITE FRIENDS WHOM HE DESCRIBED AS SYMPATHETIC TO PLOTTERS, INTENTION OF OFFICERS WAS TO CLEANSE MILITARY OF "PERVASIVE CORRUPTION PERMITTED BY REGIME." SHOEFI SAID THEIR AIM WAS TO INITIATE POLITICAL ACTION: HE DID NOT SAY THEY WANTED TO ASSASSINATE ASAD.

3. SHOEFI SAID THAT OFFICERS WERE ALMOST ENTIRELY ALAWITE, WITH A COUPLE OF ISMAILIS ALSO IN GROUP. SIZE OF THEIR ORGANIZATION BECOMING CLEARER DAILY, AS THOSE ARRESTED DIVULGED UNDER INTERROGATION NAMES OF ASSOCIATES. HIS LATEST FIGURE ON NUMBER OF ARRESTED WAS 120 OFFICERS. HE SAID THESE WERE EITHER PRO-JADID ALAWITES OR WERE NEW GROUP OF INDEPENDENT ALAWYITES; HE CLAIMED THERE SMALL POSSIBILITY SOME UMRAN OFFICERS INVOLVED, BUT THEN CAST DOUBT ON THIS IDEA. HE UNDERSTOOD THAT ORGANIZATION'S LEADER WAS RAIQ NAQQRI, WHO HE DESCRIBED AS "HALF-CRAZY." HE EXPLAINED THAT NAQQRI HAD DEVELOPED "NEW" POLITICAL THEORY DISCOUNTING BOTH MARXISM AND LIBERALISM, AND HAD PROPOUNDED HIS VIEWS IN ONE OR TWO MILITARY MAGAZINES IN PAST YEAR OR SO (NOTE: WE HAVE LOCATED ARTICLE BY NAQQRI IN ONE OF THESE MAGAZINES, JAYSH AL-SHA'B -- PEOPLE'S ARMY -- AND WILL REPORT IT SEPTTEL). SHOEFI DOUBTED NAQQRI HAD SUFFICIENT STATURE OF INTELLIGENCE TO HEAD UP ORGANIZATION AS EXTENSIVE AS THIS ONE, AND SUSPECTED THERE WERE OTHER BEHIND HIM.

4. SHOEFI WAS NOT CERTAIN HOW REGIME UNCOVERED EXISTENCE OF ORGANIZATION, BUT HE SAID ONE STORY HE HAD HEARD ASCRIBED DISCOVERY TO JORDANIAN SECURITY SERVICE, WHICH PASSED ALONG DETAILS TO ASAD.

5. SHOEFI ASSERTED THAT PRES. ASAD QUITE CONCERNED ABOUT REVELATION OF LARGE, ORGANIZED GROUP PLOTTING AGAINST HIM. ACCORDING TO SHOEFI, THIS WILL FURTHER EXACERBATE TENSIONS
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WITHIN ALWAITE COMMUNITY. HE STATED ASAD WORRIED THAT OTHER GROUPS OF YOUNG OFFICERS MAY TRY TO SUCCEED WHERE THIS GROUP FAILED. SHOEFI NOTED THAT IN ORDER TO RELIEVE INTERNAL PRESSURE ON HIS LEFTIST FLANK, ASAD RECENTLY INITIATED MEETING WITH CPS POLITBURO HEADED BY KHALID BAKDASH TO REQUEST CPS ASSISTANCE IN REPAIRING RELATIONS WITH SOVIET UNION (SEPTTEL WILL REPORT ACTIVITIES OF RECENT SOVIET FRIENDSHIP DELEGATION TO SYRIA). SHOEFI CLAIMED THAT VISIBLE IMPROVEMENT IN SYRO-SOVIET RELATIONS MIGHT BETTER ENABLE ASAD TO DEAL WITH LEFTIST OFFICERS WHO MIGHT BE COUNTING ON SOVIETS FOR SUPPORT.

6. SHOEFI ADDED THAT, FROM HIS TALKS WITH SYRIAN OFFICERS,

HE SEES NEW PHENOMENON DEVELOPING AMONG OFFICERS WHO HAVE SERVED IN LEBANON. HE SAID THEY WERE FREE TO DEBATE ISSUES ONLY AND DISCUSS VARIOUS POLITICAL TOPICS THERE WITH OTHER SYRIANS AND WITH LEBANESE AND PALESTINIANS. RETURNING TO SYRIA (APPARENTLY ON ROTATION OR HOLIDAY PASSES), THEY FIND THEMSELVES AGAIN WATCHED BY SYRIAN SECURITY SERVICES BUT ARE NOW MORE RESENTFUL OF LACK OF FREEDOM IN SYRIA BECAUSE THEY HAVE TASTED IT IN LEBANON. HE SAID THIS PROCESS TAKING PLACE MORE QUICKLY THAN HE HAD EXPECTED LAST SUMMER.

7. SHOEFI CONCLUDED BY RELATING INTERNAL DEVELOPMENTS TO "U.S. EFFORTS TO ARRANGE OVERALL SETTLEMENT OF PROBLEM WITH ISRAEL." HE SAID ASAD WILL PROBABLY FIND IT DIFFICULT TO ADOPT DOUBLE STANDARD OF PUBLICLY ATTACKING "ZIONISM AND U.S." WHILE SECRETLY MOVING TOWARD SETTLEMENT. HE SAID ASAD MUST OPERATE "IN THE OPEN, LIKE SADAT." THIS WOULD BE VERY THORNY PROBLEM FOR ASAD TO WORK OUT, BECAUSE SYRIA MUST PLAY KEY ROLE IF SETTLEMENT PROCESS TO SUCCEED. HE SPECULATED THAT ASAD AT SOME POINT MAY EVEN OPT FOR "COUP AGAINST HIMSELF" BY MOVING TO LIBERALIZE REGIME AND PERMIT OPPOSITION PARTIES TO FUNCTION. SHOEFI SAW NO SIGN OF THIS NOW BUT SAID HE DID NOT RULE IT OUT IN THE FUTURE.

8. DECISION BY ASAD TO MOVE CLOSER TO SOVIET UNION FOR INTERNAL POLITICAL REASONS COULD INCREASE SOVIET LEVERAGE ON REGIME AS ASAD ENTERS DELICATE STAGE
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OF FORMULATING SYRIAN POLICY TOWARD PEACE SETTLEMENT PROCESS. ANOTHER MOTIVATION FOR SEEKING IMPROVED RELATIONS WOULD BE TO ASSURE RECENT MISUNDERSTANDINGS OVER LEBANON CAUSED NO HITCHES IN MILITARY SUPPLY LINE.

9. ASAD'S PROBLEMS WITH OFFICER CORPS MAY GROW IF PROCESS SHOEFI MENTIONED AMONG OFFICERS WHO HAVE SERVED IN LEBANON GAINS SERIOUS MOMENTUM. SIZE OF DISSIDENT ORGANIZATION, IN SHOEFI'S VIEW, SEEMS TO HAVE CAUGHT REGIME OFF-GUARD. OPPOSITION FROM PRO-JADID ELEMENTS IS NOT NEW PHENOMENON, BUT EXISTENCE OF GROUP OF INDEPENDENT ALAWITES UNALIGNED WITH JADID, UMRAN OR ASAD FACTIONS AND PROMOTING "CLEANSING OPERATION" IN MILITARY WOULD RAISE DISTURBING PROBLEMS FOR ASAD WITHIN ALWAITE COMMUNITY AND OFFICER CORPS. WE ALSO DO NOT RULE OUT COOPERATION BETWEEN ALLEGED INDEPENDENTS AND JADIDISTS. WHILE ASAD WAS ABLE TO STALEMATE HIS OPPONENTS DURING DIFFICULT DAYS LAST SPRING AND SUMMER BY TACTICALLY MODIFYING HIS POLICY IN LEBANON, YOUNG MILITARY OFFICERS ATTEMPTING TO FOCUS DISCONTENT ON CORRUPTION ISSUE INHERENTLY MORE DIFFICULT FOR ASAD TO FINESSE.

10. SHOUFFI'S ELABORATION OF EARLIER COUP ATTEMPT RUMORS (DAMASCUS 8542) ADDS TO CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE THAT PLOT EXISTED AND WAS FORESTALLED BY SECURITY SERVICES. AS YET UNANSWERED QUESTIONS INCLUDE EXTENT OF PLOT, WHETHER ANY HIGH-RANKING OFFICERS OR CLOSE ASAD ASSOCIATES INVOLVED AND WHETHER OTHER GROUPS OF THIS NATURE EXIST (OR POTENTIALLY EXIST) AMONG JUNIOR OFFICER CORPS. WHILE IT IS REASSURING THAT PRESIDENT'S SECURITY SERVICES EFFECTIVELY FORESTALLED THIS ATTEMPT, INCIDENT ALSO UNDERLINES THAT ALAWITE OFFICER CORPS REMAINS A BREEDING GROUND FOR PLOTS AND PLOTTERS. IT ALSO SERVES TO REMIND US OF OUR LIMITED ACCESS TO YOUNGER OFFICERS IN THE SYRIAN ARMY. WE KNOW VERY LITTLE ABOUT THEIR FEELINGS TOWARD THE PRESIDENT'S LEBANESE VENTURE, HIS CAUTIOUS FAVORING OF A PEACE STEELEMEN WITH ISRAEL AND THE OBSTACLES TO CORRUPTION WHICH ALLOWS TO APPEAR AT SENIOR LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT AND ARMY.

MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 16 SEP 1999
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: DISSIDENT FACTIONS, GOVERNMENT OVERTHROW, PLOTS, POLITICAL MILITARY RELATIONS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 16 DEC 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: CunninFX
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976DAMASC00008
Document Source: ADS
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: 11652 XGDS-4
Errors: n/a
Film Number: D760462-1278
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19761293/baaaesbe.tel
Line Count: 183
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, TEXT ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: CunninFX
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 MAY 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <05 MAY 2004 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <07 SEP 2004 by CunninFX>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: <DBA CORRECTED> srp 970919
Subject: SYRIAN DISSIDENT PROVIDES FURTHER DETAILS OF RECENT
TAGS: PINS, SY, (ASAD, HAFIZ), (SHOUFI, HAMOUD)
To: STATE INFO ALGIERS
AMMAN
BEIRUT
CAIRO
JIDDA
MOSCOW

DIA

Type: TE

Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006